OPENING STATEMENT OF

THE HONORABLE VERNON J. EHLERS
CHAIRMAN
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY AND STANDARDS
COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Ongoing Problems and Future Plans for NOAA's Weather Satellites
November 16, 2003
10 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.
2318 Rayburn House Office Building

Thank you Chairman Boehlert. I am pleased that the Committee is holding this important hearing today.

This year's tragic hurricane season reminded all of us that the United States is highly vulnerable to severe weather events. Weather satellites, such as NPOESS, provide vital data for three- to seven-day forecasts of severe weather, including hurricanes. We desperately need these new satellites to allow us to do an even better job of forecasting. Unfortunately, the NPOESS program has a history of major problems. It already experienced one major contract re-plan that in 2003 delayed the program by 10 months and increased costs by $900 million.

Two years ago, I held a hearing in the Environment Subcommittee about these problems with NPOESS. At that hearing, officials from NOAA and the Air Force assured me that they were doing everything they could to minimize future cost overruns and schedule delays. Yet, here we are today facing an additional three-year delay and up to $3 billion in increased costs. I hope the witnesses explain how we got to this point with NPOESS, what they plan to do to get this important program back on track, and what lessons we have learned for improving the federal government's approach to the weather satellite programs. We simply cannot continue doing business this way.

Like Chairman Boehlert, I have some specific concerns I hope the witnesses will address today. For example, if this program is so far off track now, why are we waiting until FY 2008 to consider adding funds to it? Also, due to the delays in NPOESS, the U.S. faces up to a four-year gap in polar satellite coverage. I want to know how a gap would degrade our ability to forecast hurricanes, and if there are contingency plans for that situation. It is urgent for us to get these new satellites up. The added cost of getting the NPOESS program back on track rapidly is minuscule compared to the damage and lives lost we would incur if we no longer can forecast severe weather, such as hurricanes, accurately.

These are just a few of the issues I look forward to discussing today. I thank the witnesses for being here and yield back the balance of my time.